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When writing one of his most influential works, *Mere Christianity* (1952)—the title used for the compilation of BBC radio talks he presented from 1941-1944—C. S. Lewis explains what he means by "mere."[1] In this brief apologetic text, he is not appealing to a specific denomination or advocating that one Christian group is superior to another. He observes, "Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times" (xv).

In fact, Lewis is self-effacing regarding his expertise in theology and asserts that he is focused on basic Christianity—the foundation of the faith: "Finally, I got the impression that far more, and more talented, authors were already engaged in such controversial matters than in the defence of what Baxter calls "mere" Christianity. That part of the line where I thought I could serve best was also the part that seemed to be thinnest. And to it I naturally went" (xv). The popular Christian author invites all—those who wish to enter into the hall and to participate in the fellowship of faith—to become a "mere" Christian: "I hope no reader will suppose that "mere" Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions. . . . It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals" (*Mere Christianity* 5).

Lewis references the origin of the term "mere Christianity" from Richard Baxter, an English Puritan clergyman (1615-1691) who "did his best to avoid the disputes between Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and other denominations, even convincing local

ministers to cooperate in some pastoral matters. 'In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity,' he was fond of saying" ("Richard Baxter"). This belief concerning "mere Christianity" seems to be the *modus operandi* of C. S. Lewis. Since this term reflects the essential Lewis, its application to his life seems appropriate and insightful. He is indeed the "mere" Christian, evangelist, author, and friend.

Not only was Lewis "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England" (*Surprised* 228-229), he was also reluctant to attend church; even so, he soon discovered not only its importance but its necessity. He writes concerning church attendance: "When I first became a Christian, about fourteen years ago, I thought that I could do it on my own, by retiring to my rooms and reading theology, and I wouldn't go to the churches and Gospel Halls." But he observes, "If there is anything in the teaching of the New Testament which is in the nature of a command, it is that you are obliged to take the Sacrament, and you can't do it without going to Church." Lewis later has a realization:

> I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit. ("Answers" 61–62)

Lewis came to understand that for the Christian to mature spiritually and for the "very worship of God to be adequate," he must fellowship with other believers (Martindale). He explains: "God can show Himself as He really is only to real men, and that means not simply to men who are individually good, but to men who are united together in a body, loving one another, helping one another, showing Him to one another. For that is what God meant humanity to be like; like players in one band, or organs in one body" (*Mere Christianity* 90). Lewis continues to describe the importance of the human connection: "If there were no help from Christ, there would be no help from other human beings. He works on us in all sorts of ways: not only through what we think our 'religious life.' He works through nature, through our own bodies, through books, sometimes through experiences

which seem (at the time) *anti*-Christian." For example, "when a young man who has been going to church in a routine way honestly realises that he does not believe in Christianity and stops going — provided he does it for honesty's sake and not just to annoy his parents — the spirit of Christ is probably nearer to him then than it ever was before. But above all, He works on us through each other" (102). Lewis definitely sees the significance of the Body of Christ, the Church:

> Men are mirrors, or "carriers" of Christ to other men. Sometimes unconscious carriers. This "good infection" can be carried by those who have not got it themselves. People who were not Christians themselves helped me to Christianity. But usually it is those who know Him that bring Him to others. That is why the Church, the whole body of Christians showing Him to one another, is so important. You might say that when two Christians are following Christ together there is not twice as much Christianity as when they are apart, but sixteen times as much. (*Mere Christianity* 102)

Thus, Lewis realizes that the real Christian must fellowship with mere Christians. Lewis also believed in the importance of sharing his faith. His dramatic conversion had "made him a different person" and from that time forward for the rest of his life, "he devoted himself to developing and strengthening his belief, and almost from the year of his conversion, he wanted to become an evangelist for the Christian faith" (Sayer 231). Owen Barfield, Lewis's lawyer and long-time friend, comments that Lewis "felt it was the duty of every Christian to go out into the world and try to save souls" and was even embarrassed by the author's enthusiasm for Christ (qtd. in Mitchell 20, 23). In his essay "Christianity and Culture," Lewis confirms his view on evangelism: "Yet the glory of God, and, as our only means to glorifying Him, the salvation of human souls, is the real business of life" (14). The apologist shows that he is clearly committed to that endeavor in his essay "Christianity and Literature": "But the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world" (10).

John Wain, a student Lewis tutored, observes, "Lewis used to quote with approval General Booth's remark to Kipling: 'Young man, if I could win one soul for God by—by playing the tambourine with my toes, I'd do it.' Lewis did plenty of playing the tambourine with his toes, to the distress of some of the refined souls with whom he was surrounded at Oxford" (69).

Lewis established himself as a prolific writer. In fact, he "published almost forty books, nearly seventy poems, 125 essays and pamphlets, three dozen book reviews, and two short stories" (Dorsett, Rev.). He also penned thousands of letters (many now published in the three-volume collection edited by Walter Hooper) and preached several sermons that have been transcribed. His life was dominated by his desire to spread the good news of his conversion and his faith to others. Lewis's evangelism has been described as a four-pronged approach: teaching, writing, praying, and discipling (Ryken 55-78). As Christopher Mitchell notes, "One begins to sense Lewis's enormous drive to save souls." It is therefore no surprise that Lewis has been appropriately labeled a "literary evangelist" (Dorsett, "C. S. Lewis" 8). Lewis admits, "Most of my books are evangelistic," and he sees his role as a translator, "My task was therefore simply that of a translator—one turning Christian doctrine, or what he believed to be such, into the vernacular, into language that unscholarly people would attend to and could understand" ("Rejoinder" 181, 183).

Even in his early fiction Lewis was evangelizing. In a letter to Sister Penelope dated July 9, 1939, he expressed his bemusement at the reviewers of the first book in his Space Trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, noting that "out of about 60 reviews, only 2 showed any knowledge that my idea of a fall of the Bent One was anything but a private invention of my own?" He acknowledges, "But if only there were someone with a richer talent and more leisure, I believe this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelisation of England: any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under cover of romance without their knowing it" (*CL* 2: 262). Lewis was faithful to this vision. This was confirmed toward the end of his life in an interview with Mr. Sherwood E. Wirt, a member of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, on May 7, 1963: "Would you say that the aim of Christian writing, including your own writing, is to bring about an encounter of the reader with Jesus Christ?" To which he replied, "That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in view. For example, I have just finished a book on prayer, an imaginary correspondence with someone who raises questions about difficulties in prayer" ("Cross-Examination" 262).

As a result of this commitment to evangelism, Lewis felt compelled to answer every letter that he received. His erudite and penetrating insight into matters theological, his clear and crisp writing style, and his creative and engaging fiction appealed to young and old alike, and because of this multi-faceted writing talent, Lewis continued

to grow in popularity—a popularity that demanded he respond to his readers. More and more letters arrived at the Lewis household to the point that even with the assistance of Warnie his brother, C. S. Lewis felt overwhelmed. When his listening audience clamored for more radio talks, Lewis declined because he felt like he could not keep up with the correspondence (Sayer 280). In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis observes that the "essential of the happy life" is "that a man would have almost no mail and never dread the postman's knock" (143). To a youthful fan who had written him in 1956, Lewis commented that his correspondence was increasing: "[N]ow that I have such a lot to write, I've just got to do them all at once, first thing in the morning" (*Letters to Children* 60). He even answered mail during the year of his death. In a March 26, 1963, letter to Hugh, a young American who was the oldest of eight siblings living in Washington D.C. and had been writing Lewis since 1954, Lewis expresses his frustration at the number of letters he continued to receive: "Don't get any more girls to write to me unless they really need any help I might be able to give. I have too many letters already" (*Letters to Children* 38, 106-107).

Dorothy L. Sayers, a popular apologist in her own right, especially known for her plays and her detective stories, comments on Lewis's evangelism in a letter she wrote to him in May 1943. She, like Lewis, received correspondence from those with religious questions. Sayers complains about her experience with an atheist:

> Meanwhile, I am left with the Atheist on my hands. I do not want him. I have no use for him. I have no missionary zeal at all. God is behaving with His usual outrageous lack of scruple. The man keeps on bothering about Miracles; he thinks Hall Caine's *Life of Christ* is the last word in Biblical criticism, and objects violently to the doctrine of Sin, the idea of a Perfect Man without any sex-life, and the ecclesiastical tyranny of the B.B.C. He is in the Home Guard, can't spell, and has a mind like a junk-shop. If he reads any of the books I have recommended, he will write me long and disorderly letters about them. It will go on for years. I cannot bear it. Two of the books are yours—I only hope they will rouse him to fury. Then I shall hand him over to you. You like souls. I don't. God is simply taking advantage of the fact that I can't stand intellectual chaos, and it isn't fair. (413)

It seems clear that Sayers is being somewhat tongue-in-cheek here, for her editor notes that "the correspondence continued for at least another year and she even permitted him [the Atheist] to call on her twice" (413, n.8).

C. S. Lewis definitely felt that God had called him to share his experience with others albeit not with conventional evangelism but through his fiction and his apologetic works. This wide appeal to varied audiences of children and adults, scholars and students, theologians and laymen shows that Lewis is a mere author in the sense he describes it, for his works are "like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. […] [I]t is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals" (*Mere Christianity* 5). He invites the readers into his "several rooms."

C. S. Lewis was also a gregarious person and tended to be accepting of a variety of fine folk he called friends. One of his closest friends, J. R. R. Tolkien, observes, "But Lewis was a very impressionable man, and this was abetted by his great generosity and capacity for friendship" (362). In his autobiography *Surprised By Joy*, Lewis mentions two of his most important friends: Arthur Greeves and Owen Barfield. He called Greeves his "First Friend," which Lewis describes as "the *alter ego*, the man who first reveals to you that you are not alone in the world by turning out (beyond hope) to share all your most secret delights. There is nothing to be overcome in making him your friend; he and you join like raindrops on a window" (199). Lewis met him in April 1914 (*CL* 1: 51-53) and relates the experience:

> I received a message saying that Arthur was in bed, convalescent, and would welcome a visit. I can't remember what led me to accept this invitation, but for some reason I did.
>
> I found Arthur sitting up in bed. On the table beside him lay a copy of *Myths of the Norsemen*.
>
> "Do *you* like that?" said I.
>
> "Do *you* like that?" said he.
>
> Next moment the book was in our hands, our heads were bent close together, we were pointing, quoting, talking—soon almost shouting—discovering in a torrent of questions that we liked not only the same thing, but the same parts of it and in the same way; that both knew the stab of joy and that, for both, the arrow was shot from the North. Many thousands of people have had the experience of finding the first friend, and it is none the less a wonder; as great a wonder . . . as first love, or even a greater. I had been so far from thinking such a friend possible that I had never even longed for one; no more than I longed to be King of England. . . . Nothing, I suspect, is more astonishing in any man's life than the discovery that there do

> exist people very, very like himself. (130-131)

This friendship developed to the point that Lewis writes a letter to Arthur Greeves, dated December 29, 1935, wishing Greeves could live near him in Oxford:

> After all—tho' our novels now ignore it—friendship is the greatest of worldly goods. Certainly to me it is the chief happiness of life. If I had to give a piece of advice to a young man about a place to live, I think I shd. say, "sacrifice almost everything to live where you can be near your friends." I know I am v. fortunate in that respect, and you much less so. But even for me, it wd. make a great difference if you (and one or two others) lived in Oxford. (*CL* 2: 174)

He also writes to Arthur Greeves (July 29, 1930) about meeting two new friends:

> Since writing the last sentence I have come into College to entertain two people to dinner & spend the night. . . . One of them is a man called Dyson who teaches English at Reading. He is only in Oxford for a few weeks and having met him once I liked him so well that I determined to get to know him better. My feeling was apparently reciprocated and I think we sat up so late with the feeling that heaven knew when we might meet again and the new friendship had to be freed past its youth and into maturity in a single evening. . . . Such things come rarely and are worth a higher price than this. . . . The other man was Coghill of Exeter. (*CL* 1: 917)

Both Hugo Dyson and Neville Coghill turned out to be central to the Inklings. C. S. Lewis and Owen Barfield were lifelong friends. In *Surprised By Joy*, Lewis describes him as a "Second Friend":

> But the Second Friend is the man who disagrees with you about everything. He is not so much the *alter ego* as the antiself. Of course he shares your interests; otherwise he would not become your friend at all. But he has approached them all at a different angle. He has read all the right books but has got the wrong thing out of every one. It is as if he spoke your language but mispronounced it. . . . And then you go at it, hammer and tongs, far into the night, night after night, or walking through fine country that neither gives a glance to, each learning the weight of the other's punches, and often more like mutually respectful enemies than friends. Actually (though it never seems so at the time) you modify one another's thought; out of this perpetual dogfight a community of mind and a deep affection emerge. But I think he changed me a good deal more than I him. (199-200)

In fact, Colin Duriez asserts, "It is no exaggeration to say that his friendship with Barfield was one of the most important in his [Lewis's] life; as important at least, in its different way, as that with Arthur, and with a few others whom Lewis met later" (*C. S. Lewis* 88). The relationship was reciprocated by Barfield. After Lewis's death on November 22, 1963, when Barfield visited Wheaton College on October 16, 1964, he reflected on his friendship with the Cambridge don: "Now, whatever else he was, and as you know, he was a great many things, C. S. Lewis was for me, first and foremost, the absolutely unforgettable friend, the friend with whom I was in close touch for over forty years, the friend you might come to regard hardly as another human being, but almost as a part of the furniture of my existence" (3).

J. R. R. Tolkien, who was instrumental in Lewis's conversion, was a friend of Lewis for almost four decades. Colin Duriez notes, "I have been aware of the friendship between J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis for a long time, since first reading the latter's autobiography as a student, but in writing this book I have been surprised to discover how very strong and persistent it was, despite frictions and troughs that, perhaps, one should expect to occur over nearly forty years" (*Tolkien* ix). In a letter to Dick Plotz, "Thain" of the Tolkien Society of America, dated September 12, 1965, written almost two years after Lewis's passing, J. R. R. Tolkien describes his gratitude and his debt to the author: "The unpayable debt that I owe to him was not 'influence' as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my 'stuff' could be more than a private hobby. But for his interest and unceasing eagerness for more I should never have brought *The L. of the R.* to a conclusion" ("Letter 276," p. 362).

For Lewis, the value of friendship cannot be overemphasized, and his commitment to his friends shows that he was someone who could be trusted—that he stood "side by side," "absorbed in some common interest" with them (*Four Loves* 61). Lewis's attitude toward them is reflected in his very famous sermon, "The Weight of Glory": "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal." His friends are all invited into the rooms Lewis describes—to sit beside him and enjoy "fires and chairs and meals."

To Lewis, "mere" means more, not less, and because of that, his legacy remains and continues to grow. He dedicated himself completely to everything he embraced; thus, he was an exemplary Christian. This "mere Christian" was not a "mere mortal," but he was a "mere" author, evangelist, and friend.

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